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ABSTRACT

Due to changes in certification and a shortage of special education teachers, school districts in rural Nevada frequently employ special education teachers who have not been trained to teach students with severe or multiple disabilities or serious emotional disturbances. A recent survey of 271 special education teachers and administrators in northern Nevada identified a wide range of training needs. To address these needs, the University of Nevada, Reno, developed Project PRESS (PReparing Educators of Students with Severe Disabilities), a 2-week on-campus summer institute that is organized according to eight quality indicators of educational programs for severely disabled students, that offers rural educators two graduate credits, and that provides follow-up services tailored to their schools. In two summers, the institutes have been attended by 58 special education teachers, general education teachers, and related service providers. Institutes focus on inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes, involvement of families in decision making, integration of specialized services into ongoing educational activities, and promotion of meaningful participation in community settings. As a key feature of the institutes, participants may request follow-up services: either inservice training to an entire staff or individualized on-site consultation to assist in implementation of newly learned concepts. Participants have requested 20 follow-up visits, impacting over 100 additional school personnel and parents. Evaluations suggest that the summer institutes influence participants' subsequent performance, skills, and attitudes. (SV)

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PREPARING RURAL EDUCATORS OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES: SUMMER INSTITUTES AND ONGOING SUPPORT

Students with serious emotional disturbance or severe, multiple disabilities display intensive educational needs. Unfortunately, special education teachers frequently do not possess the competencies needed to meet these intensive needs. The lack of adequately prepared teachers frequently occurs because teachers may be teaching out of the area in which they are licensed. Secondly, in rural areas special education teachers are expected to teach a variety of students. These teachers are typically prepared to teach students with mild to moderate disabilities. However, it is not unusual for these teachers to be expected to provide services to one or more students who are seriously emotionally disturbed or severely, multiply disabled. These teachers typically need, and ask for, additional information and training in order to meet the more intensive educational needs of these students. One of the goals of this project, **PR**eparing **E**DUCATORS OF **S**TUDENTS WITH **S**EVERE DISABILITIES (**Project PRESS**), addresses the issues of rural teachers:

> Project PRESS will provide additional preparation to rural special educators in the areas of serious emotional disturbance and severe, multiple disabilities.

By addressing this goal, the project improves the educational services being provided to students who are seriously emotionally disturbed or severely, multiply disabled. The educational services provided to these students reflect current state-of-the-art procedures emphasized within the project. Project PRESS stresses individualization of education which emphasizes inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes, involvement of families in educational decision-making, integration of specialized services into ongoing educational activities, and promotion of meaningful participation in community settings.

Training Needs

Unfortunately, many of the teachers of students with serious emotional disturbance and those with severe, multiple disabilities do not possess needed competencies. Prior to 1984 Nevada used a generic credential that allowed certified teachers to teach any type of student with disabilities. This method of certification resulted in teachers who had minimal competencies in specialized areas such as the low incidence disabilities. In 1984 Nevada instituted a two-tier process of licensure in which teachers first obtain a generalist resource endorsement which allows them to teach students with mild to moderate disabilities. In order to teach students with serious emotional disturbance and

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students who are severely, multiply disabled, teachers are required to earn a second endorsement for that specialized area. Unfortunately, teacher shortages frequently result in districts hiring teachers with the generalist endorsement to teach students with low incidence disabilities. Therefore, these teachers are teaching in areas for which they do not hold an appropriate license and do not possess the necessary competencies to provide appropriate educational services to students with serious emotional disturbances or severe, multiple disabilities.

When the two-tier certification system was instituted, teachers who were certified under the old system were not required to update their endorsements. Thus, many of these teachers continue to teach students with low incidence disabilities and need to have their competencies expanded as well as updated. For example, competencies are needed in integrating their students, using nonaversive approaches to behavior management, implementing functional curriculum, employing effective instructional procedures, and so forth.

The Special Education Branch of the Nevada Department of Education completed a survey of special education teachers, related services personnel, and administrators in northern Nevada regarding areas in which they would most like training. Two hundred seventy one professionals (including those who work with low incidence populations) responded to this survey. The four areas most frequently mentioned included:

Curriculum: Intervention strategies, instructional materials, language development, social skills development
Least Restrictive Environment: Special education/regular education interface, models for pre-referral interventions, collaborative/cooperative models for service delivery
Behavior Management: Dealing with aggressive students, etc.
Assessment: Identification of emotionally disturbed students, roles and responsibilities in multidisciplinary teams

Other areas identified for training needs included:

Due Process: Procedural safeguards, surrogate parents, confidentiality, legal responsibilities
Early Childhood: Assessment, curriculum, specialized populations such as drug-addicted babies
Secondary Transition: Community-based models, interagency models
Parent-professional Partnership: Communicating with parents, parent participation in conferences
Medically Fragile Students: Evaluation, placement, services
Technological Aids/Services: Computers, adaptive and augmentative communication devices
Linguistic/Cultural Diversity: Assessment, curriculum, evaluation
Orientation/Mobility Services
Vocational/Occupational Services: Curriculum, student-community partnerships

The results of this survey emphasize areas in which skills need to be improved and also highlight the fact that special education professionals themselves realize that there are areas in which their skills need improvement. Although this survey did not summarize results separately for low incidence populations, teachers of these students were included in the survey and the areas identified as needs are all important competencies for these teachers.

Providing Training through Summer Institutes

In response to these training needs, we developed Project PRESS, a 2-week summer institute supporting up to 35 rural educators who stay on campus and earn two graduate credits for successful completion of the institute. We give first priority to rural special education teachers; however, related service providers and general education teachers are accepted as space permits. A combination of state and federal funding sources cover tuition costs, lodging (primarily dormitory), board, and a modest travel stipend for each participant.

We organize the institute according to eight quality indicators of educational programs for students with severe, multiple disabilities or serious emotional disturbance:

1. Parent Involvement
2. Collaborative, Transdisciplinary Teaming
3. Inclusion
4. Positive Behavioral Supports
5. Functional Curriculum
6. Systematic Instruction
7. Community-based Instruction
8. Vocational and Transition Planning.

Detailed agendas for each day of the summer institute are available upon request. Resources used throughout the institute include (a) guest speakers such as teachers who were using components of the quality indicators in their classrooms, (b) videotapes that were produced throughout the nation on related topics, (c) small group and partner work such as developing IEP objectives based on a case study and suggesting management interventions, and (d) role playing or simulations (e.g., communication strategies and systematic instruction).

We require participants to complete several small projects after the conclusion of the institute and after returning to their job sites. These projects involved assessing and setting goals and objectives for various aspects of their programs during the following school year. They were also required to discuss strategies for, as well as subsequent success, in achieving their goals and objectives.

Each participant is given the opportunity to request follow-up services from us in the school year following their participation in the institute. This turned out to be one of the most valued

aspects of the institute for both the participants who requested the service and for us. Not only were we able to visit schools and offer technical assistance or inservice presentations, but we saw first-hand the creativity and commitment of teachers serving students in remote communities.

Evaluation and Outcomes

Thus far, two institutes have been held and 58 professionals have been involved: 44 education teachers, 10 general educators, 3 speech and language pathologists, and 1 school social worker. Three types of evaluations are conducted and include (a) a course evaluation at the end of the institute, (b) a long-term evaluation of the impact of the institute at the end of the following school year, and (c) a supervisor evaluation of the impact of the institute on participant knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Course Evaluation. Institute participants complete an evaluation of the content, instruction, and learning activities at the end of each of the two institutes. The instrument used for the evaluation contains 18 statements to be rated on a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Space is provided for written comments.

Results of this survey are similar for both institutes, with the second institute ranked somewhat higher overall. For both institutes the mean responses to the questions ranged from 4.25 to 4.95, with 5 indicating the strongest favorable response. Positive written statements include comments about the knowledge and enthusiasm of the instructors, new ideas and information, guest speakers, and group activities. Suggestions for improvement include more direct observation, involvement of more general educators as participants, better classroom seating, and more student participation.

Long Term Evaluation. At the end of the school year following the first institute, a follow-up instrument was sent to institute participants asking them to indicate the overall impact the institute had on their teaching. Sixteen of 24 participants returned these follow-up evaluation forms (66%). The 18 questions on the instrument use a five-point Likert scale, similar in design to the initial course evaluation instrument.

The mean responses on the questions range from 3.9 to 5.0, with 5 indicating the strongest favorable response. The overall highest ranked item on the form referred to the value of the instructors' follow-up visits to the schools (5.0). The item "I used information from the summer institute in my job" was also rated high (4.8). The lowest rated item was "I shared information from the institute with parents" at 3.9. Narrative comments indicate that participants would like to have more ideas about modifying the attitudes of general classroom teachers and administrators. They feel that information on inclusion and positive behavioral

supports was among the most valuable. A similar follow-up evaluation will be conducted with the participants of the second institute near the close of the 1994-1995 school year.

Supervisors' Evaluations. At the end of each institute, participants are asked to indicate the names and addresses of the supervisor most able to complete an evaluation of their teaching. Approximately five months after the completion of the institutes, an evaluation instrument is sent to the designated supervisors.

For the first institute, responses were received on 19 of the 24 participants, with 16 usable surveys returned (66% of the participants). Overall, supervisors rate participants' performance since completing the institute as good to excellent. Dimensions evaluated included attitudes and knowledge about students with severe disabilities, selecting appropriate goals, use of systematic learning techniques, etc. No participant ranked below "average" on any dimension. Supervisors' evaluations have been sent for the second institute but, as of this writing, only a few have returned.

Other Outcomes. After the first two institutes, 12 participants asked us to conduct inservice training in their districts to assist them in implementation of the quality indicators. Another eight participants asked us to provide individual consultation to assist them with specific problem-solving. Through this follow-up assistance, we have reached over 100 additional school personnel and parents. Long term follow-up evaluations of the institute indicated that the follow-up visits were among the most highly valued components of the institutes.

Informally we observed an additional, unanticipated outcome of the intense nature of the institutes and the two weeks of dormitory living. Many of these educators, from communities widely scattered over a huge geographical area, find they have much in common professionally and personally. Evening activities and excursions have led to friendships and informal support networks that survive well beyond the end of the institutes.

Summary

For two summers we have conducted institutes for rural teachers of students with serious emotional disturbance and severe, multiple disabilities. A total of 58 special education teachers, general education teachers, and related service providers have attended the 2-week institutes. The focus of the institutes is on inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes, involvement of families in decision-making, integration of specialized services into ongoing educational activities, and promotion of meaningful participation in community settings.

A key feature of the institutes is that each participant is given the opportunity to request individualized follow-up services of the project directors. This follow-up takes the form of either

inservice training to an entire staff or individualized, on-site consultation to assist in implementing the concepts presented during the institute. A total of 20 follow-up visits have been requested by participants, and, through these visits, over 100 additional school personnel and parents have been impacted by this project.

Evaluations of the institutes indicate participants value the information and experiences provided. Follow-up evaluations conducted approximately 9 months after the institutes suggest that the experiences of the summer do influence the participants' performance with students and families during the following school year. Supervisors contacted approximately 5 months after the institute rate the first-year participants' skills and attitudes as good to excellent in all areas.

Rural teachers of students with severe, multiple disabilities and serious emotional disturbance face unique challenges due to the low incidence of these disabilities and the lack of informational and training resources in remote communities. The provision of summer institutes with individualized follow-up services is one method of assisting teachers in meeting these challenges.